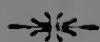


Military Order



of the

Loyal Legion

of the



United States



COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.



WAR PAPER 47.

An Interview with Abraham Lincoln.



Military Order of the Boyal Legion
OF THE
United States.



COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.



WAR PAPERS.

47

An Interview with Abraham Lincoln.

PREPARED BY COMPANION

Lieutenant-Colonel

G. C. KNIFFIN,

U. S. Volunteers.

AND

READ AT THE STATED MEETING OF MARCH 6, 1903.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from

The Institute of Museum and Library Services through an Indiana State Library LSTA Grant

An Interview with Abraham Lincoln.

There are some names in history which the thoughtful reader pronounces reverently. He stands with uncovered head before their portraits, so allied to immortality is humanity. We read their biographies and scan their features with a feeling of exultation that with all their godlike attributes, they were mortal, fashioned like ourselves, subject to like passions and infirmities, filled with the same lofty aspirations, yet subject to the same disappointments through unavoidable circumstance; triumphing at last by sheer force of character, by patient labor, and by indomitable pluck.

Abraham Lincoln! The mention of that august name never fails to fill me with the most profound veneration. That he was born in the cabin of a pioneer in the State of Kentucky is true; but it must not be forgotten that the Kentucky mountaineer was not identical with the poor whites of the Southern States. He inherited the traditional love of liberty characteristic of the mountaineer of all countries, and was the farthest removed possible from the listless, indolent denizen of the swamps and sandy barrens of the Gulf States.

The same devotion to lofty purpose that bore him through the fiery ordeal of the Presidency of a divided Republic in his later years, was evinced in his earlier struggles to achieve an education, that he might take his place among men.

The history of Abraham Lincoln has been so well and fully written that it is useless for me to recount his magnificent achievements. Looking back upon it after the lapse of forty years, there is so much to say of the events in which we of his own generation bore an humble part, that I am at a loss to know how best to

epitomize the glorious conflict in a brief address. Perhaps it would be best to recall to your minds the impression made upon the Army of which he was the Commander-in-Chief, by his personality, even as our children may relate to their children in years to come the impression they entertained of the noblest character, the warmest heart, the best of all his successors—William McKinley.

We of the Volunteer Army early became conscious of one fact that never, through all the vicissitudes of that protracted struggle, failed to inspire us with the most profound belief in ultimate victory, and that was confidence in the courage and wisdom of our leader. He wore no frills, but was not devoid of dignity. He was tall and ungainly, and so homely of feature, that caricature failed to misrepresent him; but we had with us always men of the same personal appearance whose heroism in battle won our enthusiastic admiration. It must be remembered that our Army was an army of boys. The same noble spirits who, from time immemorial, have fought the world's battles in the forum and on the battle-field. To us the personal appearance of the President was attractive. We were glad that he gave little attention to the frivolities of society, that he sympathized with the soldiers in their privations and sufferings. Our elders occasionally criticized him for what they regarded as an untimely jest upon a grave subject, but we who heard the quip and jest and bright repartee on the firing line, cared little for these things.

The illustrated papers that came into camp rarely failed to contain some picture representing the President in such light as reflected the political views of the editor. We were rather pleased than otherwise that he stirred the bile of the dilettante fellows who stayed at home and hired a substitute. We rather liked him the better for his scorn of polite accomplishments. As the months rolled by and no progress was made, with the memory of Bull Run in the East and Wilson's Creek and Belmont

in the West, the face of Lincoln took on that expression of sadness and anxiety that never left it in life. Thereafter the jest and story were only the masks to deeper feeling. He became more and more impressed with the idea that if the Union could not exist half free and half slave, then, for its preservation, slavery must go. When this determination took firm hold in the mind and heart of the President, no human power could shake it. Therein lay his strength. And so, taking counsel of his convictions, knowing that he alone was accountable to God, to his country, and to history, against the voice of his advisers in the cabinet, the Emancipation Proclamation was issued.

It came upon the Army like a night attack; all was confusion; a large majority of both commissioned officers and enlisted men had not volunteered for the extinction of slavery. On all sides was heard the cry—"We took up arms for the preservation of the Union and not for the niggers." The sternest discipline was required to reduce the refractory to submission. The border States soldiers, who had risked all for the Union, many of whom were slaveholders, were especially bitter in their denunciations. Soon, however, confidence in the wisdom of the President caused better counsel to prevail; there were few resignations and desertions. The argument that the negro could no longer be held to service upon rebel fortifications, or on the farm, while his master was away in the Confederate Army, provided he could make his escape, proved more effective than the sentimental one that slavery was wrong in principle, and soon the armies were vigorously prosecuting the campaigns of 1863.

It is not to be expected that any man in Mr. Lincoln's position could escape censure, and he was no exception to the rule. The newspaper editors, always the most astute military critics, showed how battles might have been better fought, and in their opinion the President was invariably at fault for any disaster to our arms.

The winter of 1862-1863 was prolific of failure. The Army of the Potomac had been rolled back like a scroll from Marie's Heights at Fredericksburg, and resumed its old camping ground at Falmouth, on the north bank of the Rappahannock; part of the Army of the Tennessee had made a descent upon Vicksburg by water under General Sherman, and had been beaten back by the rebels at Chickasaw Bluffs; Grant, marching south to join him at Vicksburg, reached the Yalabusha river, when the line of communication back to his base of supplies at Memphis was cut by VanDorn's Confederate Cavalry at Holly Springs, and his troops, not having learned to live upon the country and grow fat on half rations, were forced to retrace their steps to Memphis. In the East and West the bird of victory perched upon the Stars and Bars.

The only bright star in this night of gloom shone at Stone's River, Tennessee. Here the Army of the Cumberland under the brave and intrepid Rosecrans, met the Confederate Army in equal number under General Bragg, and, after four days of desperate fighting, drove it out of the works and defeated it.

The news of the victory came to the President like a harbinger of better things. One defeat after another had fallen like successive blows upon his head, and it was my good fortune to be the first officer who participated in the engagement to be admitted to his presence.

There had been from the first organization of the Union and Confederate armies in the West a large preponderance of cavalry in the latter. On the first of January, 1863, the Confederate cavalry, under command of Generals Forest, VanDorn, Wheeler, and Morgan, numbered present for duty, mounted and fully equipped, 25,000 officers and men, while the total cavalry of the Army of the Cumberland, under command of Major-General D. S. Stanley, was less than 4,000 men. The situation of the Army of the Cumberland at Murfreesboro, in Middle Tennessee,

was rendered precarious by reason of the frequent raids upon its line of communications back to its base of supplies at Louisville, Kentucky, via the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. It became necessary for Rosecrans to detach heavy bodies of infantry to build block houses at every bridge and trestle work and guard these works against raids by the Confederate cavalry.

After the victory of Stone's River, General Rosecrans set about the task of convincing the Secretary of War of the prime necessity to a forward movement of a large force of cavalry to guard his communications. The requests of the General were persistently ignored by Secretary Stanton, and the correspondence became acrimonious. Believing that a direct appeal to the President would be more successful, he wrote a full and detailed account of his position and the refusal of the Secretary to comply with his request, and entrusted the letter to me to be delivered into the President's own hand.

Arriving in Washington I proceeded at once to the White House, which I found blocked to its entrance by a mob of Army officers and civilians, each intent upon gaining access to the President. By a lucky chance I caught the eye of the usher who, making his way through the crowd, tapped my neighbor on the shoulder and said in a low tone "The President." Quick to take advantage of my opportunity I handed the usher my card, on which, below my name and rank, I had written the words "Army of the Cumberland."

It proved a talisman, for in a few minutes, to my great delight, the usher appeared again, and repeated to me the magic words "The President." I followed him through a lane lined on each side by envious and very weary men who had held tightly to their places in the line, hoping, against the experience of days of waiting, that the welcome words "The President" would fall upon their ears.

I had seen Mr. Lincoln at Cincinnati while on his way from

Springfield to Washington to be inaugurated President, and being familiar with the mountaineers of my State was struck with the sinewy strength of the man—one of those athletes who without a pound of superfluous flesh have muscles of cartilage and nerves of steel; who can tire out man or horse upon their native heath.

The man who met me with bent form and sunken eyes, yet with outstretched hand, appeared to be twenty years older than the Abraham Lincoln I had seen less than three years before. His clothes hung loosely upon his wasted form. An intense earnestness exhibited itself in his anxious inquiry, "Are you from Murfreesboro?" "Yes, Mr. President, and I am the bearer of an important dispatch from General Rosecrans," which I handed to him at once, and noting the legend "Personal" written on the envelope, he placed it in his pocket. We were alone in the room. Taking his seat at the head of the table in what I later found to be the cabinet room, he motioned me to a seat on his right, my back to the door through which I had entered. He pushed a sheet of paper towards me with the remark "Now tell me all about it." About what? Of the contents of the letter I knew nothing. I knew that I had been singled out from the waiting crowd because of my connection with the Army of the Cumberland, but I was only a captain, as unknown to him as I was, or am, to fame. Suddenly the thought occurred to me to describe the battle of Stone's River. For this I was unusually well qualified, my position on the staff of Major-General Thomas L. Crittenden, commanding one of the three corps composing the Army, had carried me to every point on the field during the progress of the battle, added to which was my familiarity with the topographical engineers who were busily engaged perfecting a map of the battle-field, and in which I had taken a deep interest, riding with them over the field and watching them while at work upon the map.

Improvising a ruler from my staff sword I drew two lines crossing each other at an acute angle, which represented the railroad and turnpike leading from Nashville to Murfreesboro. I then drew from memory of the map I had seen but a few days previously another, which I still think, although I have not seen it since then, was a tolerably correct representation of the topography of the country. I aligned the troops under Rosecrans across the turnpike and railroad as they went into bivouac on the night of the 30th of December, 1862, with Johnson's, Jeff. C. Davis' and Phil. Sheridan's Divisions of McCook's Corps on the right, Negley's Division of Thomas' Corps in the centre, and Palmer's, Wood's and Van Cleve's Divisions of Crittenden's Corps on the left; Rousseau's Division of Thomas' Corps was held in reserve, and Fry's Division of the same Corps was guarding the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. I stationed the batteries of artillery along the line, and gave the position of the cavalry. Then I gave as nearly correctly as possible the position and strength of the enemy. The President took an absorbing interest in the work as it progressed, asking questions with regard to the strength of organizations, which I answered as intelligently as possible.

To have seen the two heads bent over the map the observer would hardly have thought that one was that of the President of the United States and the other belonged to a simple staff captain in his Army.

I have written the battle since for the "Century" magazine, and have been well paid for my work; but for graphic description of the scenes then so vividly impressed upon my mind, joined to my boyish enthusiasm for heroic deeds, my forgetfulness of the august presence in which I sat, with head bent over the map, and my ringing shout of exultation as after three days of mortal combat I told how we repulsed the final charge of Breckenridge on our left, and drove them back pell-mell into Murfreesboro,

and compelled Bragg to evacuate the place, I shall always believe that I excelled the written description, and that I only escaped fame as a war correspondent by not having a stenographer with me.

I spoke rapidly, and at the recollection of the awful scenes of carnage, of the dashing courage, and the steadfast devotion of our men, the headlong charge of the enemy, and its bloody repulse, I grew vehement, not considering the exalted rank of my auditor. I told him of Hardee's early charge on our right wing, driving it back in rout. How Johnson's Division melted away, leaving Davis and Sheridan to sustain an overwhelming onslaught on front and flank. How bravely they held their ground while one after another brigade and regimental commander fell with mortal wounds, until with ammunition exhausted, both divisions were compelled to fall back in rear of the center, leaving one-third of their number dead or wounded upon the battle-field; how Rousseau, with his splendid division, left his position in reserve, and with colors flying moved rapidly into the position made vacant by the retirement of McCook's right wing, while Harker's Brigade of Wood's Division came dashing across the field from the left of the line with the light of battle on their faces, its youthful commander at its head, forming on Van Cleve's right. The Pioneer Corps and Van Cleve, with two of his hard fighting brigades, came from the extreme left at double quick to strengthen the line. Then came the tug of war. In the rear of these brigades lay the turnpike leading to Nashville. If Hardee could gain position on this road in our rear our baggage, supply and ammunition trains would be at his disposal. Rosecrans was ubiquitous. Superbly mounted he dashed into the thickest of the fray, now on the right, then on the left of the line of battle, for by this time Bragg had moved a heavy column of infantry against our centre and left. The magnificent pyrotechnics of battle at this hour surpassed descrip-

tion; every battery of artillery on both sides worked with the regularity of a steam fire engine, for the men behind the guns had been seasoned in action at Fort Donelson, Shiloh, and Perryville. The earth shook with the reverberations. The sharp rattle of musketry, mingled with the hoarse shouts of command, the cheers of the men, the groans of the wounded as they were borne to the rear, the rebel yell in the distance, combined to captivate the fancy and render the spectator oblivious to flying missiles. All day, until darkness fell, the storm of battle raged with ceaseless fury; neither side had won a fall from the other. Hardee's Corps had been beaten back, and finally withdrawn to support the attack of Polk upon the center and left of our line, which maintained its position intact, repulsing every charge, and covering the ground in its front with the Confederate wounded and dead. Night fell upon the battle-field, upon the living and the dead, and the armies, like two gladiators in the arena, lay prone on the ground, too much exhausted to fight, intent only upon food and sleep.

The following day both commanders utilized the respite granted by the other in making new disposition of troops, strengthening weak places in the lines and in burying the dead, and preparing for the final trial of strength. This came on the third day of the battle when Bragg, having organized a heavy column under Breckenridge, ordered an assault upon our left flank. To reach the main body of our army it would be necessary to ford Stone's river, a wide, deep stream, in the face of our artillery and musketry. Breckenridge protested against the movement, but was met by Bragg's peremptory order to attack. And so it came to pass that they were delivered into our hands.

"Stormed at with shot and shell
Boldly they rode and well."

Through a storm of grape and canister from fifty-two guns and volleys of musketry from the opposite bluff the brave fellows

rushed forward. The ground was literally covered with their dead before they wavered, halted, retreated, and then sought safety in flight. After them, in full flush of victory, pressed the men of Davis' Division, reaping a harvest of revenge for their own defeat of two days before.

You may be sure that I praised my own General, Thomas L. Crittenden, a chevalier Bayard of Kentucky, who directed the battle and pursuit that day when the long-contested prize was won for the Union.

During my recital the President sat motionless. I noticed that he occasionally raised his hand as if in warning, towards the door at my back, but I was too much absorbed in my theme to notice the cause. When I had finished, I for the first time raised my head and looked about me. Standing, peering over each other's shoulders at the map of the battle-field which I had drawn, listening so intently that I was not aware of their presence, was an august assembly—the various members of the cabinet, several members of the House and Senate—all of sufficient prominence to be admitted to the President's room without the formality of an introductory card. I was greatly embarrassed, but was speedily reassured by the kind-hearted President, who introduced me to each gentleman present, few of whom I have ever seen since.

A generation has passed since that glorious period of our national history, but the events of the death grapple with the bravest foe that any nation was ever called upon to meet will never pass from our memories. It was, to those of us who came out of it unscathed, the best four years of our lives.

And our magnificent leader, the President. Where now are the lampoons, the caricaturists, the copperheads. The great name is a name to conjure with. Both political parties invoke it. Candidates for the Presidency of both parties quote from his speeches and messages, and no orator in or out of Congress would

dare to refer to him in any but the most respectful terms. One of the most bitter of his enemies in life has written a lecture, now that he has passed away, on the "Life of Abraham Lincoln," in which he is placed on a pedestal higher than he ever claimed to occupy, in which he is declared to be a prophet of God.

Hundreds of biographies of him have been written and printed in every civilized tongue, and the work still goes on. His Gettysburg speech has become a classic, and his second inaugural is universally recognized as a masterpiece of persuasive eloquence. When we reflect upon his magnetic sway over the minds and hearts of men, let us thank God that he was given us in a crucial moment in the nation's life; with malice towards none, with charity for all, to lead the Union hosts to victory.

He has passed into history; tender hands have laid him in his honored grave; monuments have been reared to his memory; but embalmed in the wealth of a nation's love Abraham Lincoln, the servant of the Living God, lives forever in the hearts of his grateful countrymen.

Even as the Father of the Faithful, hallowed through all time, has held the hearts and minds of the Jewish race, until the name Abraham has become synonymous with faith in God's providence, so shall the name and fame of our illustrious President, hallowed by the sacred memory of his noble life and sacrificial death, grow brighter with each century of the world's history.

As has been eloquently said of Washington, though both were born Americans, "No people can claim him, no country can appropriate him, the boom of Providence to the human race; his fame is eternity; his residence, creation."

